



# *The Frontline Supervisor*

*Helping You Manage Your Company's  
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

*March 2001*

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- ◆ My employee is obviously depressed. I know what depression looks like because it runs in my family. I feel obligated to help, but how can I do so without saying to her that she looks depressed? I am watching her get worse.

**Avoid discussing depression** and instead focus on performance issues that affect productivity or service. Can you see that she avoids customers, makes mistakes, or is forgetful? Is she slow to complete assignments, or are there absenteeism or tardiness problems? If so, be supportive but raise these issues with her as the reasons for making a supervisor referral. It is okay to tell your employee what you observe. This can be more effective in motivating her to visit the EAP than discussing with her your impressions about her apparent depression. Employees may deny their depression, but not deny their performance issues, making follow-through with an EAP referral more likely. Ask her what causes her apparent inability to complete assignments, apparent sadness, or loss of excitement for her work. These are not diagnostic questions, but may produce from her a personal explanation that supports the performance issues for the referral.

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- ◆ My employee has been absent without leave for three days. He hasn't phoned. No one has seen him, and he hasn't returned any calls. He was absent without leave six days last fall. Should I refer him to the EAP when he gets back?

**Check with your personnel** specialist or existing policies for guidance on dealing with an employee absent without leave (AWOL). You can't know for sure when your employee will return, so delaying an EAP referral wouldn't be recommended. If a serious behavioral-medical disorder underlies your employee's disappearance, an EAP referral now could make the difference between salvaging your employee or losing him entirely. If you send a certified letter to your employee, you could include your supervisor referral along with it. Although job abandonment and AWOL problems are serious infractions, they can sometimes be explained by certain medical illnesses or crises that overwhelm an employee's judgment to report the absence. These conditions could include a variety of mental illnesses, legal crises, alcohol or drug addictions, or even frightened employees with acute health problems. AWOL employees frustrate organizations because work must be reassigned and relief workers found. An EAP referral should always accompany any administrative or disciplinary response.

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- ◆ I referred my employee to the EAP for poor job performance. She became very upset, saying that I was retaliating against her over another matter I consider closed. Can the referral of an employee to the EAP ever be considered retaliatory?

**Employee assistance programs** are not disciplinary tools; therefore, a referral to the EAP for performance problems that can be substantiated would not be retaliatory. Unfortunately, many supervisors refer too late to EAPs. When this happens, use of the EAP may appear as a "pre-step" to taking a disciplinary action or discharging an employee. In such instances, employees will connect the EAP to the organization's disciplinary process and resist accepting the referral. When the supervisor refers in anger, the same response from an employee may be observed. The supervisor referral feels retaliatory. To increase cooperation, be supportive and remind employees about the purpose of a supervisor referral-helping employees improve performance in the event a personal problem is affecting job performance.

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- ◆ The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) covers employees with qualifying physical and mental impairments. Is it true that employees are also covered if the employer mistakenly regards them as having such impairments, even if they really don't?

**If you regard your** employee as having such an impairment, even if mistaken, he or she could still be protected under the law if you took an action based upon that misperception and it was later determined to be discriminatory. With regard to a common supervision misstep, this makes it important not to label or seek to determine underlying psychological diagnoses - most of which are covered under the act - to explain employees' performance problems. Instead, focus on performance, ability to accomplish essential job functions, and referral to the EAP when standards are not met. Never make statements to others about what you think or imagine are your employee's personal problems. Actions you take later can be examined to determine whether they discriminated against your employee. The ADA would apply if your action were determined to be based upon a covered impairment you thought existed rather than the merits of performance alone.

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- ◆ I am a supervisor who is also a licensed therapist in my organization. Does the principle of not getting involved in the clinical and referral aspects of my employee's problem still apply to me?

**The EAP principle** that supervisors should avoid diagnostic and referral involvement in their employees' personal problems is not based solely upon the issue of clinical skills, but also on role conflict. Collective EAP experience abundantly shows that the risk of losing an employee increases dramatically with such involvement. Diagnostic skills of supervisors, where they exist, do not reduce this risk. Ironically, risk is likely to increase, because troubled employees perceive the struggle supervisors must face between tolerating delays in improving performance and taking administrative actions. Stepping out of the supervisor role forces the supervisor to accept or ignore case management activities that are often necessary to help an employee. These may include examining problems of non-adherence to clinical recommendations, motivational counseling, and consulting with service providers.

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### **Notes:**

***This information is intended only for the employees of your company. Please do not post it on a website that is accessible by the general public or by your company's clients.***

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